

Get Out!
John 2: 13-25

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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This morning we have before us an outrageous story of Jesus interrupting the commerce at the temple in Jerusalem. He acted with violence to scatter the property of authorized merchants. Overturning tables laden with coins, Jesus ruined the accounting of the bankers as their money got hopelessly mixed up in a clatter on the ground. Without checking with anyone, Jesus acted like he owned the place. “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” He called the temple his own Father’s house. He spoke to those in charge as if they were accountable to him.

No one laid a finger on him. I think we can scarcely imagine the personal power and presence of a man who could take over the scene without anyone daring to stop him. No guards or soldiers seized the mad man who was ruining the festival atmosphere and destroying the business interests of all concerned. He simply took over.

Jesus’ arrival in our world was not necessarily always sweet and gentle. He deliberately brought upheaval to the people of God. He pushed the envelope. He knew that for us to truly know his Father, some changes would have to occur. That change might even be explosive like a volcano.

We might like to skip this incendiary episode. And yet, as those who have been joined to Jesus as believers, we know that whatever Jesus is passionate about concerns us. If it mattered to him, it matters to us. So let’s take a look at what he said during this wild temple clearing, both here in John and in the accounts we find in the other gospels. I’ve seen four clues that may lead us into some understanding.

Clue 1: Isaiah 56: A House of Prayer for all Nations

In Matthew, Jesus says, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.” With these words, Jesus actually quoted from two Scriptures. That means Jesus was linking his actions to the deep story of God’s dealings with his people Israel. The first passage Jesus quoted from was Isaiah 56. The people of Jesus’ day would have heard Isaiah 56 as part of their great yearning for God’s future. It contained a vision of the coming of the messiah

and the day when the LORD I Am would set all things right. Those great days would show God's concern not only for Israel but for the whole world. For in the vision both Jews and Gentiles would come streaming to worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem. Both Jews and Gentiles would find their sacrifices accepted and receive God's forgiving welcome. The text goes on, "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples." The LORD God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered" (Is. 56: 7-8). The vision of the temple of the LORD was a house of prayer for Israel, of course, but also for all nations of the earth. In the days of the Messiah, all kinds of people would come to worship the LORD.

This is our first clue to why Jesus had such a problem with the merchants trading coins and animals in the temple precincts. They had set up shop in the court of the Gentiles—an outer courtyard for those who were drawn to worship the LORD God of Israel but could not yet come within the holy ground. In this Gentile court people of all nations could worship—except that when Jesus arrived he found there was no room for them because the traders and money changers had made the Gentile court into a bazaar. The vision of a worldwide gathering to the Jerusalem was being prevented.

Clue 2: Jeremiah 7: A Den of Thieves

In Jesus' next phrase, we get our second clue. Jesus said, "You have made it a den of robbers." He's quoting from Jeremiah 7. Perhaps the implication is that the merchants were actually cheating the pilgrims. So not only were they blocking the Gentiles, they were gouging their people. That's certainly a possibility, and swindling would have been enough in itself for Jesus to shut them down. But what happens if we look at that phrase "you have made it a den of robbers" in its whole setting in Jeremiah 7? If we follow the trail of our clues a little further, we see that Jesus is pointing out something much worse than petty thievery. Jeremiah 7 contains a bracing prophecy against God's people. The prophet says,

"Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become *a den of robbers in your eyes*? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.

Do you see what kind of robbery we're talking about? It was failing to love both the LORD and his little ones. The people of that day hadn't given up religion. They still came to the temple and figured everything was OK. We've got the temple where God said his name would dwell. We've got the temple where God meets his people. We've got the temple and our God accepts our sacrifices. We're forgiven and everything is all right. Yes, they came to church. But meanwhile, they failed to care for the widows and the fatherless. They committed adultery, lied, even murdered. They offered sacrifices to the gods of their culture just to keep their bases covered. They lived a cosmopolitan, eclectic life. And the LORD said his temple was filled with a bunch of robbers. They robbed him of the whole hearted worship due his glorious name. They robbed him of the compassion for the least and the lost that he demanded.

Yes, when Jesus threw over the tables and drove out the animals, he upset some people, because he interrupted the business of the day. But the worst of it were his words. Bluntly, he told the elders they had failed in their mission. They forgot that the temple was for the world, not just them. They had made the holy meeting place between God and man to be little more than a den of thieves because *their lives robbed God of his glory and the needy of their compassion.*

Jeremiah 7 goes on to include God's promise that he would withdraw his presence from the temple, burn it to the ground and scatter his wicked people. It seems the LORD is serious about our worshipping him alone. And it seems he's serious about our living justly and living out compassion. And Jesus had told the people, during their most joyful, happy feast that the temple was heading for destruction just like in the days of exile. It's little wonder they wanted to kill him. He came deliberately to upset them.

Clue 3: Psalm 69: Zeal for His Father's House

When we go back to John, we find a third clue from the Old Testament as to the meaning of this temple clearing: "His disciples remembered that it was written 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" Where did that come from? Well, we discover that these are words of King David written in Psalm 69. It's a prayer crying out to God in anguish over the enemies who have come against God's righteous king. It's a psalm in which Christians have long seen connections to Christ. Listen to these words and how much they sound like Jesus:

For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's

sons. For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.

Those who live for the glory of the LORD I Am will know opposition, as David did, and as Jesus did. But his passion for the LORD would push him on, even to the point of bearing scorn from the skeptical. David yearned to create the temple of the LORD. He envisioned the place where the uncontainable God would put his name, the place where the God who is everywhere would be especially present. His vision was for a place where people could know, “Here is your God. He is with you in this temple.” David yearned to create a place of communion. So did Jesus. That passion consumed him on the day he cleared the temple.

Clue 4: The Temple of His Body

OK, let’s bring all this around. Remember what we’ve got so far. Clue one showed us that in God’s future, the Jerusalem temple would be a house of prayer for all nations. Clue two told us that the LORD hated the hypocrisy of his people when they worshipped in the temple while yet living unjustly and failing to worship him alone. This third clue has told us that Jesus had a consuming passion for his Father’s house. How does it all come together? Just this: the officials challenged Jesus, “What sign proves your right to do these things?” Jesus replied, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” They were, of course, astounded. “It’s taken 46 years to build this temple and you think you could raise it up in three days?” Jesus seemed out of his mind.

“But he was speaking about the temple of his body.” Look what has happened. The location of the temple has changed! It’s not the building on the hill in Jerusalem. It’s Jesus himself! The meeting place between God and man is no longer in the holy of holies in the temple, it’s in Jesus! The place of sacrifice is no longer the mercy seat in the Jerusalem temple; it’s Jesus himself. He is the sacrifice that takes away sins. The dwelling place of God is no longer the temple building but the very body of Jesus Christ. Remember John 1: 14: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus is the temple. Jesus wasn’t just clearing out traders and animals so the temple could keep functioning as usual. He was clearing out the whole temple itself. He replaced it. Jesus’ whole ministry was about forging this new meeting place between God and humanity. In himself, in the temple of his body, God and man were joined. In himself, in his body, God and man were reconciled. He was the Word of God to man and the proper, perfect word of man back to God. He

brought God's love to us and our faithful love back to God. He is the new and living way. He is the Father's house in which we may dwell forever.

So finally, let's see how we can connect this amazing passage to our daily life. Every word and gesture of Jesus is potent with meaning. Everything he did or said continues to be charged with power in our lives. So let's take his words: "Take these things away. Do not make my Father's house a house of merchandise." He's got a word for us. *Get these things outta here!* What things? The things that poison our worship, clog our hearts and keep us from living out the love of God for others. All the stuff we read about in Jeremiah 7:

- Running after false gods—looking to things other than the LORD for our satisfaction and fulfillment, making God-substitutes, trying to control and manage our God.
- Oppressing his little ones—forgetting to call that widow because we're so busy; not even thinking about throwing ball with that kid who's got no Dad in the home; failing to build into the lives of others.
- Our schedules that have boxed us and our children from having any time to care for others or be devoted to God.
- All the possessions and gadgets that require so much maintenance and servicing that we are slaves to them.
- Excessive fear and caution that keeps us from being the church we're called to be; a failure of vision to seek the peace of this city of Baton Rouge; a being stuck in the inertia of our old patterns that keep us from being more welcoming and indeed going forth to seek and save the lost.
- Our pride that doesn't let us let down our guard, that warns us against appearing too committed.
- Our ceaseless desire to justify ourselves by the incessant story we tell ourselves rather than throwing ourselves day by day on the mercy of God
- Our fierce desire to be in control rather than dependent on God.
- In short, building a *temple for myself* made of my dreams, my ambitions, my way.

Jesus stands amidst our lives and our church and he declares: Get these things outta here. I am the temple now. Get in me. Make room for me. I am the meeting place. I am the forgiveness. I am the mission.

The temple court can be so clogged with the day to day trading that there is no room for prayer and worship. The marketplace is so loud we don't hear the cries

of the little ones. *Get these things outta here.* The new temple has been established. The body of Jesus is the temple. We are joined to him, we become living stones in his temple, growing and fitted together in love.